

TURKEY'S LIBERAL ISLAM AND HOW IT CAME TO BE

For many decades, Arabs and other Muslim nations saw Turkey as a lost cause, a country which abandoned its own faith and civilization. That why, despite the customary rhetoric, Turkey never served as an example of the compatibility of Islam and modernity. It represented instead the abandonment and even suppression of the former for the sake of the latter. But that a bad message for the Islamic world: When a devout believer is forced to choose between religion and modernity, he will opt and even fight for the former.

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These days the political scene in Turkey is quite startling: Some of the traditionally pro-Western and modernist circles in the country have turned bitterly anti-European and anti-American. Most notably the “Kemalists” –the dedicated followers of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the country’s modernist founder– seem to have abandoned his ambitious ideal to make Turkey a part of Western civilization. Perceiving the latter as an imperialist conspiracy, they argue that Turkey should close its borders to international institutions, markets, and values.

On the other hand, among the more Islamic parts of Turkish society, which traditionally have been antagonistic toward or at least suspicious of the West, there has been a converse U-turn. Some of the Islamic circles, most notably those who support the incumbent AK Party (AKP) –which has its roots in an Islamist tradition but is now “conservative”– are the most enthusiastic proponents of Turkey’s EU bid. They are also relatively more supportive of political freedoms, civil liberties, and, especially, free markets.

Alas, in today’s Turkey, a mosque-going devout Muslim might be more likely to support the country’s EU bid than a resolutely secular Kemalist.

What does this mean? Is this just an odd fluctuation in Turkey’s ever-confusing political obscurity? Or does it symbolize a deep and durable transformation?

To find answer, one needs to do a bit of historical revision.

Creation Myths vs. Ottoman Facts

The official Turkish narrative, with which virtually all Turks have been indoctrinated, states that the modern Turkish Republic –the shining star of the Muslim world in many aspects– is a clean break from the Ottoman (i.e., Islamic) past. “We were in darkness,” my primary school textbooks reiterated, “but then came Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who shone on us like the sun.” Consequently, many Turks believe they would have lived under something like the Taliban’s Afghanistan had they not been saved by the authoritarian and secularist modernization project of the Kemalist regime, which dominated the political scene in the mid-1920’s, in the aftermath of the Turkish War of Liberation (1919-22). In other words, to the question, “Why Turkey is the most advanced democracy in the Islamic world,” the standard answer is, “Because Atatürk created it ex nihilo.”

However, historians who look back to the origin of Turkey with a de-mythifying perspective find reasons to think that the creation story should be reversed. It was in fact the Ottoman legacy that gave rise both to Atatürk and modern Turkey.

Unlike the desert Arabs, who stagnated after the 13th century, the Ottoman Turks had good reason to modernize themselves: From the 15th century onwards, they were the superpower of the Islamic world, and they were right next to Europe. That's why they discovered the advances of the West before most other Islamic nations, and why they saw the need to cope with them. First they started by reforming their military. Soon, they realized that they needed to incorporate not only the hardware of modernity but also its "software," i.e. modern political and legal concepts. Hence, and thanks to the demands from Western powers came the reform edicts of 1839 and 1856, by which the powers of the Ottoman Sultan were limited and the idea of modern citizenship introduced. The non-Muslim subjects of the empire, which had formerly enjoyed "protected" but nevertheless second-class (dhimmi) status, according to traditional Islamic law, were granted equal rights. In 1876, the Ottoman Empire accepted a constitution – much earlier than Russia, Spain, or Portugal did. Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, an Ottoman bureaucrat and an Islamic scholar, prepared the Mecelle, a new legal code which was based on traditional Islamic law but which also included many important modifications thanks to the notion, "as time changes, the laws should also change."

In 1908, the Ottoman Parliament opened with not just Muslim but also Greek, Armenian and Jewish. At the time, the most popular maxim among the Ottoman intelligentsia, which included many devoutly religious figures, was "freedom." Prince Sabahattin, the Sultan's nephew, promoted the principles of individual entrepreneurship and a limited, decentralized government. The compatibility of Islam and popular sovereignty had long been declared by Islamic modernists such as Namik Kemal. In the last decades of the empire, societies emerged with names like Taal-i Nisvan ("The Advancement of Women") or Mudafaa-i Hukuk-u Nisvan ("The Defense of the Rights of Women"). In 1910 Ottoman feminist Fatma Nesibe, a Muslim follower of John Stuart Mill, argued that the Empire was in the eve of a "feminine revolution."¹

Republic without Democracy

In short, the Ottoman Empire began its modernization at least a century before the Turkish Republic, and had achieved a lot on that route. The Kemalists owed much to their Ottoman predecessors. Its leaders, after all, Mustafa Kemal included, had been educated in the modern schools founded by the Caliph/Sultan Abdulhamid II.

Yet there was a profound difference between the Ottoman reformers and the Kemalists: the former had tried to create a synthesis of Islam and modernity, whereas the latter had neither the time nor the vision to do that. Instead –taking their inspiration from the staunchly secularist French Enlightenment and the anti-clerical French Revolution– they tried to minimize the role of religion in

¹ Sex And Power In Turkey: Feminism, Islam And The Maturing Of Turkish Democracy, ESI, 2007.

society through the use of state power. (The more bigoted Islamists, who were suspicious of all efforts toward modernization, including those of the Islamic modernists, certainly played a role in the emergence this radical secularism.)

Actually the Kemalist project, carried out by the People's Party founded by Atatürk, was not the only available vision for Republican Turkey. In the beginning, there was another political party with a more Ottoman-like mindset. Founded by war heroes such as Kazım Karabekir, Refet Bele or Rauf Orbay, the namely Progressive Party, outlined a program in 1924 which proposed a free-market economy, a less radical reform process, a softer approach towards Kurds, and, most important of all, esteem for religion. But the party could survive only for six months: it was closed down on 5 June 1925, and its leaders were excluded from politics. The announced reason was the Article 6 in its program, which noted, "We are respectful to religious ideas and sentiments."

Hence came Turkey's "single party regime" (1925-46) and its iron handed policies aimed at secularizing the public square. Sufi orders, Islamic schools and even religious garments were outlawed (While men's "fez" were outlawed, the female headscarf, notably, wasn't touched.) Textbooks and state rhetoric started glorify the pagan culture of the pre-Islamic Turks, and scientism became a sort of official faith. Since modernization was seen synonymous with Westernization, and the latter with excessive secularization –which were all debatable presuppositions– anything that resembled the Islamic past was pushed aside. Some Kemalists even considered turning the magnificent Blue Mosque of Istanbul into an art gallery. The cultural self-hatred came to a point of banning Turkish songs on the Turkish radio: for a period, only "modern" (i.e. Western) music was allowed. The universal Muslim call for prayer, the Arabic-langue "ezan," was forcefully translated into Turkish, a move which conservatives perceived as an attack on their tradition.

The early Turkish Republic crushed not only political opposition but also civil society. Among others, the feminist societies dating from the Ottoman years were closed down. The regime did not oppose feminism per se, but assumed that, like everything else, it had to be, in tune with the zeitgeist, "of the state, by the state and for the state." Democracy would come to Turkey only in the aftermath of World War II, which opened a whole new pro-democratic era in the world to which the Kemalist elite had to adapt, albeit quite unwillingly.

The Two Roads to Modernization

Which of these two models of Turkish modernization –the Ottoman or the Kemalist one– was a better idea is a never-ending debate within Turkey, but there are two solid facts.

First, the Kemalist experience suggested to most Muslims in other nations that they had to make a choice between Islam and modernity. (And a great deal of them, of course, chose the former and rejected the latter.)

Second, the idea of a synthesis between Islam and modernity, say, the Ottoman tradition, lost its impetus. The post-Ottoman Middle East entered a whole new phase of colonialism and anti-colonialism, whereas Turkey rejected the very synthesis upon which it had been built.

And as Turkey's secularist establishment worked hard to erase the Islamic tradition, which it considered "backward," it ironically contributed to its real backwardization with that very policy. "In Turkey, the closure of madrasahs... meant that the more educated, sober and responsible element in Islam declined," observes Karen Armstrong, one of the world-renowned experts on religion, in *A History of God*. "The more extravagant forms of underground Sufism were the only form of religion left."² Today Turkey's secularists watch those extravagant forms of folk Islam with disdain and regret that they have not suppressed them enough, without realizing their own role in the whole scheme of things.

But "the more educated, sober and responsible element" in Turkish Islam nonetheless survived, via popular scholars such as Said Nursi (1878-1960), who stood firm against Western materialism but supported Turkey's democratization and entry into NATO, and emphasized the importance of faith and morality while refraining from politics. Nursi's books inspired millions who constituted the "Nur" (Light) movement, which has been a beacon of moderation. Today the most powerful Islamic group in Turkey is led by a follower of Nursi, Fethullah Gülen, whose millions of followers have made stunning achievements in the media, modern education, and inter-faith dialogue.

In other words, the tradition of Ottoman Islam persisted within Turkey. It was, of course, only in the periphery of society; but it would not remain there forever. The more Turkey would modernize, the more its observant Muslims would find chances to assert themselves and their values.

The Rise of the Unwashed

The biggest recent transformation in Turkish society has been the migration from villages and small towns into the big cities; a process which began in the 1950's and is still ongoing. Most immigrants were religious, whereas the cities they poured into were secular citadels. The newcomers automatically became the underclass, naturally, and the secular city elite took this for granted. "The nation-state belonged more to us than to the religious poor," says Orhan Pamuk, Turkey's recent Nobel laureate in literature, in remembrance of his childhood

² Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, 1993, p. 292.

in the 1950s. But he adds that his secular folks were also afraid of “being out-classed by people who had no taste for secularism.”³

And that is exactly what happened. The sons and daughters of the “religious poor” began to flourish in business, intellectual life, and politics. It was not just major cities, such as Istanbul and Ankara, that were reclaimed by conservative Muslims via mosques and headscarves, some conservative towns of Anatolia such as Kayseri or Konya also began to write their own success stories via their local entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. Especially under the revolutionary years of Turgut Özal (1983-93), who personified a synthesis of liberalism and Islam, the idea of political, economic and religious freedom flourished in Turkey and empowered the marginalized and silenced elements of society, which included conservative Muslims and even the Kurds.

Meanwhile, the transition from the illiterate folk Islam of the countryside to the “high” literate Islam of the city was creating what sociologist Ernest Gellner called “neo-orthodoxy”: modern Muslims who are less traditional but more observant and devout than their parents. “The bourgeois Muslim woman... wears the veil or the headscarf not because her mother did so,” notes David Martin Jones, “but precisely because she did not.”⁴ The difference between the tight but modern “turban” of Istanbulites and the lax but unstylish “headgear” of villagers – a distinction much emphasized by Turkey’s secularists – corresponded precisely to that. Gellner also correctly noted that neo-orthodoxy is the breeding ground for Islamism – which is a “modern” ideology that reconstructs Islam not only as a religion but also as a “system.”⁵

But can not neo-orthodoxy also be the vehicle for creating a non-Islamist modern Islamic identity? Turkey’s experience shows that it is possible.

The Rise and Fall of Islamism

Indeed Turkey’s traditional Islamic communities such as the Nur movement never adopted Islamism – even when they bred their own neo-orthodoxies. They remained loyal to democracy and supported center-right democratic parties such as Özal’s Motherland Party. But even this mild Islam was seen as a threat by the secular state and thus was suppressed. The religious vacuum created in the society soon began to be filled with radical Islamist ideas pouring in from the Middle East. From the 1970s on, Islamic bookstores began to feature more of the works of radical thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb of Egypt and Sayyid Abul A’la Maududi of Pakistan than those of Nursi. These new Islamists dismissed Nursi’s views as “the Islam of flowers and bugs,” since his major theme was natural theology, not political ideology.

³ Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, translated by Maureen Freely. Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 82.

⁴ David Martin Jones, “Out of Bali: Cybercaliphate rising,” *The National Interest*, Spring 2003.

⁵ *Ibid.*

The political Islamist movement led by Necmeddin Erbakan was a manifestation of this new radical current in Turkish Islam. Erbakan's rhetoric was never violent, but it was clearly anti-Western, anti-secular, and widely considered anti-Semitic. His first and only prime ministry in 1996 was forced to a quick end by a "post-modern coup" during which the armed forces induced the government to resign. That dramatic failure was both an important lesson and a sign for the reformist wing in this party, which would soon break away from his Islamist line to create the AKP in 2001. From the first day, AKP leaders emphasized that they abandoned Islamism. They perceived themselves as "Muslim democrats," and instead their party as "conservative." In a sense, they reverted to Turkey's authentic Islamic tradition, according to which Erbakan was an anomaly.

In November 2002, the AKP won 34.3 percent of the votes and a clear majority in the parliament. Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, soon became prime minister, and his government has introduced many liberal reforms, boldly advanced Turkey's EU admission process, and created an economic success story. The AKP proved to be, in the words of *Newsweek* columnist Fareed Zakaria, "the most open, modern and liberal political movement in Turkey's history."⁶

The Empire Strikes Back

Yet Turkey's secularists, especially the Kemalists, never really believed that Erbakan's former followers had "transformed" and they waited anxiously for the time which it would unveil its "real face." Meanwhile they trusted their man at the top of the state, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who famously said, "Kemalism is a state ideology that each citizen has to side with."⁷ The breaking point came in May 2007, when Sezer's term came to an end and the AKP announced its candidate for the post: the (then) Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, who is widely respected in virtually all capitals of the world, but is deeply resented by some elders of Ankara for his Islamist past and the headscarf of his wife. The resentment led the Turkish military to issue a harsh "secularism warning" on the night of April 27, which led the Constitutional Court to cancel the presidential voting process based on a newly invented and very controversial argument about the quorum. Faced with a deadlock, the AKP announced early elections on July 22, which it won with a victory unseen in Turkish politics since the 1960s.

AKP's triumph has disappointed Turkey's secularists, but they were determined to hold up their swords. And soon they acted: when the AKP brought in a constitutional amendment that would enable veiled girls to join universities, the powers that be in Ankara decided to launch their crusade. The Chief Prosecutor of the High Court of Appeals, Abdurrahman Yalçınkaya, filed an indictment against the AKP and submitted it to the Constitutional Court on 15 March 2008. He

⁶ Fareed Zakaria, "A Quiet Prayer for Democracy," *Newsweek*, 14 May 2007.

⁷ "Sezer'in Konuşması...", *Radikal*, 14 April 2007, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=218378>.

called for the party to be closed down, and 71 of its top members, including Prime Minister Erdoğan and even President Gül be banned from politics. The count case was still going on as this article was written.

This closure case, not surprisingly, created a huge controversy in Turkey and was denounced as an attempt for a “judiciary coup d’etat” by many Turkish democrats. European Union officials also criticized the case. EU Commissioner for Olli Rehn represented a widespread approach in Europe when he said at Oxford University that the cleavage in Turkey is “between the secularists, especially the extreme rather than liberal secularists, on the one hand, and the Muslim democrats many of whom are reformed post-Islamists, on the other hand.”⁸ And while such comments made Turkey’s “extreme secularists” increasingly anti-EU, they also nudged the “Muslim democrats” more Westwards, in sympathies.

Muslim Discovery of the West

The main argument of Turkey’s radical secularists is that the AKP has a “hidden agenda” and will reveal its “true” (Taliban-like) face when it finds the right moment. Such conspiracy theories are very popular among Kemalist bureaucrats and pundits, but there is virtually no empirical evidence that they rely on. The evidence actually suggests otherwise.

Take, for example, the survey titled “Religion, Society and Politics In a Changing Turkey.” It was carried out in 2006 by political scientists Binnaz Toprak and Ali Çarkoğlu and supported by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), a leading think-tank. Based on interviews with thousands of individuals from Turkey nationwide, and in comparison to the survey they had carried out in 1999⁹, Drs Toprak and Çarkoğlu revealed that religiosity is thriving in Turkey, but is also moving away from political Islam.¹⁰ Indeed, in response to the question “Should there be political parties based on religion,” the percentage of respondents answering “Yes” has dropped from 41 to 25 percent in the past 7 years. Moreover, demand for “a religious state based on shariah (Islamic law)” has dropped dramatically from 21 percent to nine percent. And when harsh measures of the shariah were asked, such as stoning, only two percent were supportive. The bottom line of the study is that Turkish Islam is flourishing, but is also undergoing a silent reformation.

Why is Turkey’s vast Muslim conservative on this democratic path? Why are they in favor of the EU bid? And why has the AKP persistently taken this new, pro-Western direction?

⁸ “Rehn: Fight is between extreme secularists and Muslim democrats,” *Today’s Zaman*, 3 May 2008.

⁹ *Türkiye’de Din Toplum ve Siyaset* (Religion, Society and Politics in Turkey), in Turkish, Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) publications. Co-authored with Binnaz Toprak, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Boğaziçi University, 2000.

¹⁰ *Değişen Türkiye’de Din, Toplum ve Siyaset* (Religion, Society and Politics in Changing Turkey) in Turkish, Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı (TESEV) publications. Co-authored with Binnaz Toprak, 2006.

One answer might come from a significant discovery that Turkey's observant Muslims made in the past quarter century: that the West is better than the Westernizers. What this means is that they recognized that Western democracies give their citizens all the religious freedoms that Turkey has withheld from its own. In fact, no country in the free world has a secularism as illiberal as Turkey's self-styled *laïcité*. Any society or club which has an Islamic name or purpose is illegal, and religious education is very limited. A woman wearing a Muslim headscarf has no chance of any kind of learning in Turkey, whether in public or private schools. There is also the bitter language used by the secular elite towards observant Muslims. Some call the women in headscarves "tightheads," and the ones in the black chador "cockroaches."

For many decades, devout Muslims in Turkey have perceived all this secular fundamentalism as a product of the West, and hoped that de-Westernization would end their feelings of being "a pariah in their own land," as the late Islamic poet Necip Fazıl once put it. Yet, the more they learned about the West, the more they realized that the problem is rooted in the mindset of Ankara – not of Washington, London, or Brussels. Having realized that the real West is preferable to the caricature of it they have at home, they have re-routed their search for freedom. Instead of trying to Islamize the state, they have decided to liberalize it – a policy which helped the AKP get support from Turkey's secular liberals, most of the Kurds, and even many Armenians.

The Rise of Islamo-capitalism

Another striking feature of the AKP is its unabashed championship of the free market, which is quite different from the anti-capitalist stance that is shared by many Islamic movements in the Middle East, and even by some "modernist" Muslim intellectuals. Actually since the early 20th century, the Islamic world has been dominated by socialist thought. However, close study of the religious texts and the early history of the Islamic civilization could lead to the conclusion that Islam and free markets are indeed compatible – an argument outlined by Maxime Rodinson in his classic, *Islam and Capitalism*.¹¹

Which should also remind us of Max Weber, who argued for the role of religion in economic growth in his study of the "Protestant ethic" and the rise of capitalism in the West. In fact Weber was not very hopeful for Islam in this regard. For him Islam was an obstacle to capitalist development, as it could foster only aggressive militancy (jihad) or contemplative austerity. However, one of the greatest Turkish sociologists, Sabri F. Ülgener – both a student and a critic of Weber – argued that Weber, despite his genius in analyzing the origins of capitalism in the West, misjudged Islam and overlooked its inherent compatibility with a "liberal market system." (It is worth noting that Weber was very pessimistic about China and Japan too.)

¹¹ Maxime Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism*, New York, Pantheon, 1974.

And now, in Turkey, Ulgener's prediction is coming true with the rise of an Islamic-inspired capitalism. The European Stability Initiative (ESI), a Berlin-based think tank, conducted an extensive study in 2005 of the "Anatolian tigers," booming Turkish companies and districts in the heartland of conservative Turkey. ESI researchers interviewed hundreds of conservative businessmen in the central Anatolian city of Kayseri (most of whom voted for AKP), and discovered that "individualistic, pro-business currents have become prominent within Turkish Islam," and a "quiet Islamic Reformation" was taking place in the hands of Muslim entrepreneurs. The term they used to define these godly capitalists was also the title of their report: "Islamic Calvinists."¹² Weber should have lived to read it.

The rise of an Islamic entrepreneurial class is a remarkable phenomenon, because it marks the beginning a whole new stage for Islamic civilization. People understand religion according not only to its textual teachings, but also their social environment. This environment has been feudal, imperial, or bureaucratic in most contexts. But now, in Turkey and in a few other Muslim counties such as Malaysia, Islam is being transformed into a religion of the middle class and its rational, independent individuals.

No wonder this social change generates new interpretations of religion. In the new Turkey, models parade down the catwalk in fancy headscarves and Koranic courses are promoted by clowns handing out ice cream. "Islamic feminists" argue against the "male-domination ideology within Islamic thought." Just last year, the Turkish Diyanet, the official religious body which controls every mosque in the country, announced that it will cleanse the traditional collections of hadiths (sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad) from misogynistic statements. The head of the Diyanet, Dr Ali Bardakoğlu, a liberal theologian appointed by the AKP government in 2002, was more recently asked if missionary work was a threat to Turkey as some nationalist claim. "No," he replied. "It is their natural right; we must learn to respect even the personal choice of an atheist, let alone other religions."¹³

A Light onto Other Muslim Nations?

For many decades, Arabs and other Muslim nations saw Turkey as a lost cause, a country which abandoned its own faith and civilization. That's why, despite the customary rhetoric, Turkey never served as an example of the compatibility of Islam and modernity. It represented instead the abandonment and even suppression of the former for the sake of the latter.

¹² "Islamic Calvinists- Change and Conservatism in Central Anatolia," ESI, September 2005.

¹³ "Turkey: Four Street Evangelists Jailed", *World Wide Religious News*, 28 April 2007, <http://www.wwrn.org/article.php?idd=24931&sec=23&cont=5>.

But that is a bad message for the Islamic world: when a devout believer is forced to choose between religion and modernity, he will opt and even fight for the former. The solution is not a strict separation but a synthesis between Islamic and modern values. With its Ottoman heritage and a century-old democracy, Turkey has the potential to breed that much-needed amalgamation. That potential was denied and marginalized for several decades, but it is coming back. And this is good news – not only for Turkey, but also for the world.

The experience of Turkish Islam also offers a hint as to how the much-sought reform of the Islamic world will come about: through the flourishing of democracy and free markets. Only these social dynamics create individuals and communities who are willing to adapt to modernity. On the other hand, if Muslim societies are forced to accept modernity –through, say, secularist tyrannies or Western military interventions– they simply react to it, and the backlash fuels radicalism.